CHAPTER IV

THE WASHO CASE IN ECONOMIC THEORY

The Washo had no money, marketplaces, trade for profit, accumulation of capital, or inheritance as these relations are defined in standard economic experience. Little trade was present, either among Washo or between Washo and non-Washo peoples. Goods and services did not move through profit-incentive, or for capital reserves and the accumulation of prestige goods. Goods did move, however, through the incentives of subsistence, fulfillment of ritual obligations, and the maintenance of social approval.

The following sections address certain theoretical problems in economic anthropology: non-market mechanisms of exchange, political power and the economy, barriers to economic development, prestige economy and money, and overproduction.

Non-market Mechanisms of Exchange

A market is a price setting mechanism in the form of a sociocultural institution of economic exchange. A market involves exchange at bargained rates according to supply and demand. Generally Washo society would be described as having a "non-market" economy because it did not have marketplaces (a physical place where people customarily come to exchange), prices were not "set", and the value of goods or a service was not usually determined by what other goods or services they could be exchanged for.

Only in the distribution forms we have described as involving secondary social relations (gambling, trade, and payment for services) do we find anything analogous to market institutions. In Washo society the exchange or market value was usually overshadowed by personal, social, religious, or biological survival values. It is essential to include these non-market values in any equation that attempts to describe the regularities of Washo economics.

Few demands were set by the culture for economic goods. When these demands were filled individuals ceased working. There was no significant accumulation of property beyond immediate needs. Hoarding was impossible due to the requirement of sharing with relatives and friends. There was a constant social lien on the production of individuals and little social advantage to be gained by accumulating goods. The most renowned Washo among his own people in historic times, Gumalanga, behaved and dressed as the poorest among them. Gumalanga expressed the egalitarian orientation of Washo social values.

The eight forms of economic distribution discussed in Chapter III were the major mechanisms of distribution in Washo society. To varying degrees

Rabbit skins were also cut into strips and woven into warm robes. Conical houses were made of wooden poles and brush thatch for winter weather while a half-dome windbreak served for warm weather.

The household of a family and relatives in a single winter house was the basic socioeconomic unit of society. Each household worked and shared together in solving the problems of survival and fulfilling social and ritual obligations. The household continued to fish, hunt, and collect its food in a fairly uniform way year after year in the same sector of Washo territory. If the fishing was poor in one place, they moved to another stream. If the pinenuts failed, they went to the west and gathered acorns. And wherever they went, they hunted or gathered what was available: some tree grubs here, a lettuce-like vegetable there, and a squirrel or rabbit or bird at the next place. The procurement and preparation of food was clearly the most time consuming activity in Washo life.

Men and women often worked together at the same tasks, but there was some division of labor by sex. Men hunted and except for basketry, were the craftsmen who made the clothing, houses, and hunting and fishing gear. Women gathered plant and insect foods, prepared and cooked them, made the baskets, and tended the children. A few individuals specialized to a degree in becoming shamans, midwives, herbalists, or particularly adept in a craft.

Sharing, as the economic basis of family life, was the very essence of Washo economy. Sharing found expression in the producing task groups that drew members from more than one household. It was through sharing that the vast majority of goods changed hands. Exchange, with a stronger demand for reciprocal equivalence than sharing, characterized the economic aspects of social rituals, as well as the more impersonal forms of distribution such as gambling, trade, and payments made for services rendered.

Washo economy appears in a few ways to be distinctive in the Great Basin. The Washo ranged a particularly productive environment which allowed them the highest population density in the Basin. The Washo may have had less trade than the surrounding peoples because of several factors, language isolation being one. Pinenut groves were privately owned, a rare phenomenon in the Basin. Washo techniques for gathering and storing pinenuts, in strips and the construction of great caches, is also perhaps unique in the Basin and inadvertently presented them with another unique phenomenon, overproduction.

There are still broad gaps in our knowledge of Washo aboriginal life. The data are fairly complete on language and mythology, but the rest of Washo culture has been only sketched out in its major outlines. Most of this is unrecoverable and only by careful interviewing, archeology, and scrutiny of historical documents can we hope to reconstruct a way of life that began to disappear over 100 years ago.